

News from Ed Markey

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FINAL TV RATINGS DEAL HAILED BY MARKEY AS "TRIUMPH OF COMMON SENSE"

Washington, DC -- After an often acrimonious 6-month struggle with the nation's television industry, parents groups led by the PTA, the Center for Media Education, American Medical Association, the National Education Association, the American Psychological Association and others today released the product of a month-long negotiation to add the "V" for violence back into the V-Chip ratings system. Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA), author of the V-Chip law, and one of the parents group's key allies in this struggle, expressed his gratitude today to the industry, the parents groups and public officials who came together to allow a content-based ratings system to go forward on an industry-wide basis.

"This was an unprecedented negotiation from the beginning, something that many felt would fail. The industry had refused to consider adding "V", "S", "L" to its ratings system, and the parents groups needed to organize themselves for a tough negotiation. I am very pleased that they have now come together around a single, content-based system that will give parents the information they need to make viewing choices for their children and blocking choices with the V-Chip. This agreement has shifted the balance of power between American families and their TV sets back in favor of parents, and the real winners are our children."

Markey has spent four years promoting a paradigm that empowers parents, not the government, with information and technology needed to protect their small children from objectionable television programming, particularly when parents are not home. The two key elements are the V-Chip and the ratings system. The V-chip, a term coined by Markey when he first introduced the concept in 1993, is computer circuitry that will be built into all new TV sets pursuant to a law that Markey pushed through Congress in 1996. It allow parents to activate a blocking system so that all shows that carry a common rating can be blocked from the view of their children.

The ratings system is key to determining how "user friendly" the V-Chip turns out to be, however. The industry proposed just 3 blocking categories, all based on age. Parents groups and Markey criticized this approach as a "black hole" that denied parents the ability to distinguish between programming that is violent, sexually explicit or profane. In April, Markey wrote to the FCC urging the agency not to approve the system because it failed to meet the minimum standard of acceptability in the V-Chip law. Simultaneously, he secured an agreement from the FCC to hold a public hearing on the subject. Meanwhile, 6 national polls came out indicating overwhelming support from parents for a content-based system.

The industry acknowledged this rising consensus and agreed to add "V", "S" and "L" to the age-based "PG", "14" and "MA" categories, as well as a new letter, "D", indicating "suggestive dialog." In addition, violence intended for children in the TV-Y7 category will carry the letters "FV" for "fantasy violence." As a result, TV screens will soon carry a grid, accessible using the remote control, that looks like this:

TV-MA	V	S	L	D
TV-14	V	S	L	D

TV-PG	V	S	L	D
Y7	FV			

By clicking on individual letters, parents will be able to choose to block violence, for example, while not blocking "suggestive dialog." "By Christmas, 1998," said Markey, "many models of new TV sets will contain this technology, and parents will have an upgraded "on/off" button to deal with the digital world of hundreds of channels, much of it inappropriate for small children."